

Reporters Use New Technology to Thwart NASA's Secrecy

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CAPE CANAVERAL, March 19 — A kind of electronic war game has broken out off the coast of Florida, pitting the space agency and the Navy against reporters covering the efforts to salvage wreckage from the shuttle Challenger.

Because the National Aeronautics and Space Administration has wrapped much of the salvage operation in secrecy, many reporters and news organizations have resorted to a variety of highly technical and expensive means to gather information.

They range from the use of advanced lenses and an experimental laser camera to film in darkness to the employment of short-wave radios and elaborate antennas in order to intercept radio communications from recovery ships at sea.

The use of radio monitoring by news organizations has proliferated in the 11 days since Navy divers discovered the Challenger's crew compartment and the remains of the seven astronauts killed when the shuttle exploded Jan. 28 over the Atlantic. When that discovery was made, NASA enforced a flat ban on the release of any details of the recovery operation.

Hugh Harris, a spokesman here for NASA, say the decision had been made out of respect for the privacy of the families of the astronauts.

Ronald Cohen, managing editor of United Press International, said he could not remember another event where such highly technical means were being routinely employed to obtain information.

"It's an extremely competitive story, and NASA has not kept us abreast of some of its most important parts," said Mr. Cohen. "While I understand why NASA wants to spare the families, people have a deep interest in what happened to those seven people who died. They have a right to know what happened."

The general complaint of news organizations was that the space agency, in not making available whatever information could, had forced them into extraordinary efforts to gather news they consider important.

"The problem is that NASA has put us into a position where we have to resort to these methods," said Mr. Cohen. "Actually, it's all part of the larger tradition — you do what you need to do to get the story."

In response to the monitoring, Navy ships and other vessels employed by NASA to assist in recovery operations have at times used coded messages, scramblers and special radios that transmit on variable frequencies to escape the monitoring.

The extreme secrecy surrounding

the recovery operations has also extended to naval operations. The three times the Preserver, the Navy salvage ship, has returned to port with debris from the crew compartment and, presumably, remains of the astronauts, the ship has arrived after nightfall, with its decks completely darkened.

No Confirmation of Remains

NASA's penchant for secrecy is such that the agency has never confirmed whether any remains of the astronauts were ever recovered, even though videotape, shot with long-lens cameras, clearly showed military ambulances meeting the ship on two occasions.

Some of that videotape has included pictures made by highly advanced low-light cameras that amplify available light up to 55,000 times, so that pictures can be in virtual darkness.

In addition, CBS News has brought to Florida an experimental camera, developed in Israel for military intelligence purposes, that uses a laser beam in the same fashion a flashbulb is used to illuminate objects in total darkness.

To discourage filming of recovery activity at sea, the Navy has closed a two-mile radius zone around the crew compartment recovery site, and about a mile around other salvage operations.

In response, the networks, which have regularly been hiring ships to film at sea, are using special cameras with long lenses that have built-in gyroscopes to keep them steady.

Legal Questions Arise

Although some news agencies say the monitoring of the marine communications is akin to the routine use of police scanners to obtain tips of news events, the activity does raise some legal questions.

Peggy Reed, the associate general counsel for the Federal Communications Commission, said it was a viola-

tion of Federal law to divulge or publish the contents or meaning of any intercepted radio communication without the authorization of the sender.

But so far neither NASA nor the Navy, which are both aware of the monitoring, has raised any objection to the activity, although Mr. Harris conceded that some NASA personnel were unhappy about the monitoring.

Lieut. Comdr. Deborah A. Burnette of the Navy, the spokesman here for salvage operations, said that monitoring was not a problem to the Navy. "If we have information that we don't want released, it can be encoded," she said.

The radio monitoring was begun by the television networks. At first, for example, CBS News relied on marine radios aboard ships the network hired to travel daily to salvage sites.

Last month the network used snippets of intercepted transmissions to report that recovery ships had found floating pieces of debris that included "personal effects" of the astronauts. NASA never confirmed the report.

Now the press site at the Kennedy Space center, a complex of trailers, small buildings and a geodesic dome that houses the space agency's public affairs office, has taken on the appearance of a NASA tracking station, with a grid work of copper wires and antennas stretched overhead.

CBS News, NBC News and ABC News all have their own radio equipment, as do the Cable News Network and Independent News Network. The Associated Press and United Press International installed equipment last weekend to intercept and monitor radio communications from Navy salvage ships off the coast.

The New York Times has joined with The Los Angeles Times, The Chicago Tribune and The Orlando Sentinel in hiring a local ham radio operator to monitor transmissions from the ships and to furnish periodic reports.